LISTING OF CLAIMS

No amendments to the claims are submitted with this paper. The following listing of claims is presented solely for the Examiner's convenience:

1. (Previously Presented) A surgical instrument and instrument introducer assembly for facilitating the insertion of the surgical instrument into a cavity or a body opening of a patient, comprising:

a surgical instrument for performing a surgical procedure; and

an instrument introducer assembly including:

a tubular body portion defining a lumen therethrough, the tubular body portion having a proximal end and a distal end; and

a distal end portion secured to the distal end of the tubular body portion, the distal end portion defining a pocket having an annular wall with an axial length such that the annular wall of the pocket is substantially in contact with an outer surface of the surgical instrument along substantially the length of the pocket and including a substantially planar distal end wall configured and adapted to stretch and conform to a shape of the outer surface of the surgical instrument to facilitate passage of the surgical instrument in a sealing relation to the surgical instrument;

wherein the surgical instrument stretches the distal end portion of the instrument introducer as it is advanced therethrough.

2. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 1, wherein the distal end portion includes an annular side wall depending from an outer terminal edge thereof.

3. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 2, wherein the distal end portion is made from an elastomeric material.

4. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 2, wherein the distal end wall of the distal end portion includes an aperture formed therein.

5. (Original) The instrument introducer according claim 4, wherein the aperture is coaxially aligned with a central longitudinal axis of the tubular body portion.

6. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 4, wherein the distal end portion is secured to the distal end of the tubular body portion such that the annular side wall at least partially overlaps the distal end of the tubular body portion.

7. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 6, wherein the distal end portion is secured to the distal end of the tubular body portion such that the annular side wall completely overlaps the distal end of the tubular body portion.

8. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 4, wherein a proximal terminal edge of the annular side wall of the distal end portion is secured to a distal terminal edge of the distal end of the tubular body.

9. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 7, wherein the distal end portion is secured to the distal end of the tubular body by at least one of fusing, overmolding, gluing and bonding.

10. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 4, wherein the tubular body portion is fabricated from polypropylene.

11. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 4, further including a flange extending radially outward from the proximal end of the tubular body portion.

12. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 3, wherein the distal end wall of the distal end portion is provided with a region of weakened strength.

13. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 12, wherein the region of weakened strength includes at least one of score lines, perforations, webbing and reduced thickness.

14. (Previously Presented) The instrument introducer according to claim 4, wherein the distal end portion has a frustoconical profile including a concave annular side wall.

15. (Previously Presented) A surgical instrument and instrument introducer assembly for facilitating the insertion of the surgical instrument into a cavity or a body of a patient, comprising:

a surgical instrument for performing a surgical procedure; and

an instrument introducer assembly including:

a hollow elongate cylindrical body including a distal end portion terminating in a distal edge and a proximal end portion, the cylindrical body defining a central longitudinal axis; and

an elastomeric cap secured to the distal end portion of the cylindrical body, the cap defining a pocket having an annular wall with an axial length such that the annular wall of the pocket is substantially in contact with an outer surface of the surgical instrument along substantially the length of the pocket and including a substantially planar distal end wall having an outer terminal edge and an annular side wall depending from the outer terminal edge thereof, the distal end wall including an aperture formed in the pocket configured and adapted to stretch and conform to a shape of the outer surface of the surgical instrument to facilitate passage of the surgical instrument therethrough in a sealing relation to the surgical instrument, wherein a center of the aperture is coaxially aligned with the central longitudinal axis;

wherein the surgical instrument stretches the aperture of the distal end wall of the instrument introducer as it is advanced therethrough.

16. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 15, wherein the cylindrical body is configured and adapted to receive a surgical instrument therethrough.

17. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 15, further including a flange extending radially outward from a proximal terminal edge of the proximal end portion of the cylindrical body.

18. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 15, wherein the cap is secured to the distal end of the cylindrical body such that the distal end wall of the cap is spaced a distance from the distal terminal edge of the cylindrical body.

19. (Original) The instrument introducer according to claim 15, wherein the cap is secured to the distal end of the cylindrical body such that a proximal terminal edge of the annular side wall is secured to the distal terminal edge of the cylindrical body.

20. (Previously Presented) The instrument introducer according to claim 15, wherein the distal end portion has a frustoconical profile including a concave annular side wall.

21. (Previously Presented) A method of introducing a surgical instrument into a cavity or a body opening of a patient, comprising the steps of:

providing a surgical instrument for performing a surgical procedure;

providing an instrument introducer assembly, wherein the instrument introducer includes a hollow tubular body having a distal end portion and a proximal end portion defining a lumen therebetween, and a resilient cap secured to the distal end of the tubular body, the cap defining a pocket having an annular wall with an axial length such that the annular wall of the pocket is substantially in contact with an outer surface of the surgical instrument along substantially the length of the pocket and including a substantially planar distal end wall having an aperture formed therein;

inserting the distal end of the instrument introducer into the cavity or body opening of the patient;

inserting the surgical instrument into the lumen of the tubular body of the instrument introducer through a proximal end of the tubular body; and

advancing the surgical instrument through the lumen of the tubular body of the instrument introducer thereby stretching the instrument introducer such that the aperture of the distal end wall stretches and conforms to a shape of the outer surface of the surgical instrument until a distal end of the surgical instrument projects out through the aperture of the cap, wherein the cap creates a seal around the perimeter of the surgical instrument extending therefrom.

22. (Previously Presented) A method of introducing a surgical instrument into a cavity or a body opening of a patient, comprising the steps of:

providing a surgical instrument for performing a surgical procedure;

providing an instrument introducer assembly, wherein the instrument introducer includes a hollow tubular body having a distal end portion and a proximal end portion defining a lumen therebetween, and a resilient cap secured to the distal end of the tubular body, the cap defining a pocket having an annular wall with an axial length such that the annular wall of the pocket is substantially in contact with an outer surface of the surgical instrument along substantially the length of the pocket and including a substantially planar distal end wall having an aperture formed therein;

inserting a distal end of the surgical instrument into a proximal end of the tubular body of the instrument introducer;

inserting the distal end of the surgical instrument, having the instrument introducer placed thereon, into the cavity or body opening of the patient; and

advancing the surgical instrument through the instrument introducer thereby stretching the instrument introducer such that the aperture of the distal end wall stretches and conforms to a shape of the outer surface of the surgical instrument until the distal end of the surgical instrument projects out through the aperture of the cap, wherein the cap creates a seal around the perimeter of the surgical instrument extending therefrom.

23. (Previously Presented) A surgical instrument and instrument introducer assembly for facilitating the insertion of the surgical instrument into a cavity or a body opening of a patient, comprising:

a surgical instrument for performing a surgical procedure; and

an instrument introducer assembly including:

a tubular body portion defining a lumen therethrough, the tubular body portion having a proximal end and a distal end; and

a distal end portion secured to the distal end of the tubular body portion, the distal end portion defining a pocket including:

a substantially circular distal end wall having a diameter smaller than a diameter of the tubular body portion; and

an annular wall depending from the circular distal end wall to the tubular body portion, wherein the annular wall is configured and adapted to contact an outer surface of the surgical instrument and facilitate passage of the surgical instrument therethrough;

wherein the distal end wall of the distal end portion includes an aperture formed therein configured and adapted to stretch and conform to a shape of the outer surface of the surgical instrument in a sealing relation to the surgical instrument, wherein the surgical instrument stretches the aperture of the distal end wall of the instrument introducer as it is advanced therethrough, and further wherein the aperture has a smaller diameter than a diameter of the circular distal end wall, and wherein the aperture is provided with a region of weakened strength.